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ABSTRACT

The nine teaching activities presented in these six extracted journal columns focus on writing assignments. The first assignment (by Gail Parson) presents a unit in which students compare the techniques used by four respected authors to evoke the world of dreams, and then--using what they learn from reading and talking about these stories--they write an original story built on dreams. The second assignment (by Mary Burman) combines new fiction for junior high students with topics for library investigation by assigning a novel to read along with an investigation of the social or personal problem dealt with in the novel. The third assignment (by John Bushman) suggests activities for prewriting before a writing unit and before specific assignments. The fourth assignment (by L. D. Groski) offers students an opportunity to explore the effects of clothes in people's lives and literature through writing, classroom discussion, and reading short stories. The fifth assignment (by Kristen Leedom) involves having students from Edgar Lee Master's "Spoon River Anthology," do research on ancestors and write a poem about them, write a poem about themselves, and publish a booklet. The sixth assignment (by James Upton) presents a list of writing guidelines and related activites. The seventh assignment (by Amy Levin) discusses teaching students how to write vivid descriptions of ordinary objects. The eighth and ninth assignments, (by Duane Pitts and Joseph Foley, respectively) based on Maurice Sagoff's "Shrinklits," require that students use their own words and imagination to paraphrase a poem, story, chapter, or novel in several short rhymed verses. (EL)

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Writing Assignment of the Month

[Compiled from Columns in Six Issues of "Notes Plus,"
April, September, and November 1984;
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Writing Assignments of the Month

The Reading/Writing Connection

Here are two assignments—one for high school authors, the other for junior high researchers. Polar in content—one grows out of daydreams, the other stands on fact—they share a common premise. Our response to literature enhances our ability to write.

Dream On

This minisunit is part of my American literature class, but it can be incorporated into any high school English class. My purposes are twofold. I want students to become familiar with established American short stories and to compare the techniques used by four respected authors to evoke the world of dreams. Second, using what they have learned from reading and talking about these stories, I want students to write an original story built on dreams. The stories I use are these:

"The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" by James Thurber

"An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" by Ambrose Bierce

"Silent Snow, Secret Snow" by Conrad Aiken

"The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" by Katherine Anne Porter

Although I cannot reproduce here the various charts, "maps," quizzes, comparative worksheets, and so on that I use in discussing these stories and comparing their structures, here are five questions that I ask students to explore.

1. When we dream, distorted time, exaggerations of sight and sound, and illogical behavior or ideas seem perfectly acceptable. Collect examples of these from the four stories.
2. Daydreams (and night dreams, too) are often triggered by events in the real world. List "triggers" you discover in these stories.
3. What mechanical devices do these authors use to signal that a character is moving in or out of a dream world? (paragraphing, ellipses, etc.)
4. Do the dreams in a given story have a common thread or similar characteristics? Are the dreams repeated, sustained, or different each time?
5. Which dream world seems most vivid and real? How does the author evoke that reality?

As "covert" prewriting for the story assignment, I ask students to write for five or ten minutes on several occasions—as a writing warm-up, as a class starter, as a journal entry, as "scratch-write" or "fast-write"—on "where I'd rather be than here!" If time and money and other hassles were no problem, what would be the ultimate fantasy spot or situation? I make this casual assignment at least three times during the days allotted for the exploration of the four dream stories.

Then we turn to the writing assignment in earnest. I ask them to write their own daydream stories, using techniques from one or more of the stories we have studied. Their "where-I'd-rather-be" writing serves as source material for this story. I remind them that the real world part of their stories will need a plot. Walter Mitty, for example, drove to town, ran errands, and waited for his wife (who had quite a personality herself!). But woven in and out of his dreary, henpecked life were Mitty's marvelous daydreams of nonchalant heroes and fierce warriors.

With a little discussion, students soon recognize that the possibilities are as endlessly inviting as their own daydreams. They *all* know what it's like to "zone out" in English class, at a boring babysitting job, while they're driving to school. We follow through with group revision and editing and several drafts. Students love sharing these stories, and I find their writing delightful. We "publish" our collection with pride!

Gail Parson, Wrangell High School, Wrangell, Alaska

All the Facts—and the Fiction

Here's a way to combine new fiction for junior high students with topics for library investigation. Our obliging librarian welcomed the opportunity to get new fiction into the hands of readers, and together we made a list of novels dealing with problems faced by adolescents of the eighties: divorce, alcohol, drugs, handicaps, child abuse, adoption, abortion, to name a few. (*Your Reading* and *Books for You*, both NCTE publications, are useful resources in compiling a list of adolescent fiction dealing with social problems.) Among the books we used were Judy Blume's *It's Not the End of the World*, dealing with divorce; Paula Danziger's *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit*, being fat and having school problems; James Forman's *A Fine, Soft Day*, the Protestant-Catholic conflict in Belfast; Michelle Magorian's *Good Night, Mr. Tom*, child abuse; Kin Platt's *The Boy Who Could Make Himself Disappear*, speech and communication disabilities. Each ninth-grader chose a novel, read it (usually eagerly!), and then prepared to investigate the social or personal problem dealt with in the novel.

Each student was to jot down at least two direct quotations from the novel he or she had read, a quote that might prove useful in introducing or concluding a research paper on the problem dealt with in the novel—an observation by the author or perhaps a bit of trenchant dialogue. Brief notes were also to be made about main characters, setting, and the fictionalized treatment of the problem, especially how honestly the author dealt with the problem. One question to be considered was whether or not the problem was solved too simply—that is, the main character merely concludes, "Okay, tomorrow I'll go to Ala-Teen and get rid of my drinking problem." Or did the author deal truthfully with the struggle that was to come or the fact that some problems would remain unsolved?

Students then spent three or four days in the library, investigating the problems dealt with in the novels they had read. Magazine articles located through the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*, *Newsbank* selections from newspapers, and nonfiction books provided the information base for their research papers.

I found this strategy particularly useful in generating enthusiasm about the topics to be researched. Students enjoyed reading the new fiction and were interested in expanding and verifying their insights through research. The quotations from the novels provided ready-made introductions or effective conclusions for their papers. The results were by far the best research papers ever turned in to me!

Mary M. Burman, Laramie Junior High School, Laramie, Wyoming

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Writing Assignment of the Month

Prewriting as Motivation

Many students bring to writing a negative attitude; some even bring a fear of writing. Extended opportunities for prewriting reduce that hostility and help take away that fear. Prewriting puts excitement back into language study and helps students understand the writing process. While students will continue to believe that writing is hard work—and it is—they will also begin to see that writing is challenging and fun.

Prewriting, of course, is an integral part of the writing process, a step that takes place before each piece of writing is to be done. In addition, I suggest scheduling a series of prewriting activities prior to the introduction of the writing unit or program. Both situations are discussed below.

Prewriting Prior to a Writing Unit

Prewriting activities that precede a writing unit should encourage students to experiment with words and phrases without penalty, to find out what works for them and what doesn't. Students can also investigate the effective uses of language by other writers. They can work with abstractions, consider clichés, discuss word derivations and coinages, experiment with metaphor.

Talking is also an important part of prewriting. Inexperienced writers think they have nothing to say, so students should spend time discussing ideas that interest them—school activities, sports, cafeteria meals, hobbies, community problems.

The following prewriting activities help students become interested in language and develop a positive attitude toward writing. Although all may be used as individual assignments, take advantage of the inherently verbal nature of groups. Adapt some activities for small groups and use others as the basis for all-class brainstorming sessions.

1. Each student jots down a half-dozen words that describe a pet. Encourage students to try for unique words, ones that discriminate. Most cats are independent; but Tiger is a loner, Lady Jade exclusive, and Sam a bum. Some mutts are cocky, others are servile. Students then clip pictures from newspapers and magazines that represent their descriptive words. Later, they read their word lists aloud as classmates try to guess the pet being described. Finally, the pictures are shared, and the discussion focuses on why a given picture suggests the meaning of a given word.
2. Students search through the sports pages and record the many different expressions used to communicate that one team has won or lost to another: *walloped, rolled over, swamped, demolished, scrambled.* Encourage students to add expressions of their own. This leads to a discussion of the power of verbs.
3. Students collect and talk about examples of lively language: bumper stickers, billboards, license plates, graffiti, T-shirts, media messages, book titles (real or imagined), popular lyrics, slang.
4. Students create visual representations of common expressions:

down in the dumps	DdUoMwPnS
mixed-up kid	IDK
man in the moon	MOmanON

5. Ask students to list words that appeal to each of the five senses; words like *glare, velvety, fishy, screech.* Discuss what happens when we use a word commonly associated with one sense in another context: loud colors (screaming red?), a sour note on the trumpet, tough talk, a harsh or smooth taste. Then have students jot down five favorite foods and list under each any descriptive words that appeal to the sense of taste. Using the same foods, ask them to come up with a sight, sound, smell, and touch word for each food. Spaghetti is bland, but it's also pale, silent, moist, and slippery.

Prewriting before Specific Assignments

Prewriting that immediately precedes the act of writing is consistent with the kinds of readiness found in other performance areas: consider the warm-up exercises practiced by athletes, musicians, singers, and actors. Students also need time to get ready to write. Perhaps they may jot down notes about ideas to include, or they may recognize that they need to learn more about a topic in order to write about it.

The following activities suggest the kinds of prewriting that immediately precede the writing activity and provide the motivation for it.

Topic: Pets

Prewriting activity. Discuss together the human qualities of any well-known animal in the comics—Snoopy, for example. List these qualities on the chalkboard. How do they fit the general category—dog? How do they create a unique dog—Snoopy? What is the effect of assigning human qualities to an animal?

Writing assignment. Students develop a piece of writing (story, description, series of comic strips) in which a real or imagined pet takes on these or other human qualities.

Topic: Dialogue

Prewriting activity. Collect in advance pictures that show two or more people speaking to one another. Settings may vary from automobiles to street corners to an elegant hotel dining room. Do not distribute the pictures until the writing begins. Introduce the activity by talking about the importance of dialogue in establishing character and developing plot. Consider examples from the class anthology or other sources. You may want to review the punctuation of dialogue. Then introduce a topic of current interest to students.

Writing assignment. Distribute the pictures and ask students to involve the people in their pictures in a dialogue about the topic introduced during the prewriting activity.

Topic: Childhood Memories

Prewriting activity. Students bring childhood pictures to class. Others besides the students may be included in the pictures, and snapshots are as useful as studio photographs. Share these pictures, talking about setting, occasion, and other special attributes.

Writing assignment. Each student relates in writing an incident suggested by the childhood picture he or she brought to class (a personal recollection, a story, a piece focusing on alternate points of view—that of the mother, the child, the photographer, for instance).

Topic: Writing for Different Audiences

Prewriting activity. Discuss how audience influences writing. Include such points as vocabulary, tone, style, choice of facts.

Writing assignment. Students pretend that they have been in a car accident and jot down the details of what happened. They then write three letters describing the incident: to their parents, to the insurance company, and to a good friend.

John H. Bushman, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas

Volume 2, Number 1
September 1984

Writing Assignment of the Month

The Clothesline

What we wear is an important consideration for most of us. Whether we dress to express our flamboyant selves or hope that our clothes—like protective coloration—will protect us in uncomfortable situations, we choose our clothing with care. Perhaps the young are most susceptible to fashion's dictates; at any rate, Madison Avenue makes special appeals to the teenage market. The following writing assignments offer students an opportunity to explore the puzzling effects of clothes in our lives and in literature.

1. Ask students to share an experience or anecdote that reveals the importance of a specific article of clothing in their lives. As a first step, ask students to share their ideas orally in small groups. After students have talked about their experiences and heard about the experiences of others in the class, they are better equipped to present their own experience or anecdote as a personal essay or narrative.
2. Assign one or more short stories in which an article of clothing has special significance in revealing the traits or personality of a particular character (for example, the fur piece in Katherine Mansfield's "Miss Brill"). Have students prepare a written analysis of why clothing is so important to the character. The narrow focus of this assignment helps students know what elements to discuss.
3. Have students write a character sketch in which details of clothing are central to the creation of character.
4. Ask students to write a one-paragraph lost-and-found notice for an article of clothing they are wearing. Accurate identification of the article from this description is essential. Shoes are a particularly successful choice since so many students will be wearing running shoes with distinctive markings. Share these descriptions aloud, asking the class to identify the wearer of each item described.
5. Ask students to write a dialogue in which two teens talk about why they "must have" a particular item of clothing that they cannot afford. Encourage them to make the dialogue express the values of the speakers. As an alternate assignment, students may write a dialogue between a teen and a parent in which the teen argues for the purchase and the parent counters.
6. Cut small pictures of people from magazines like *Time* and *Newsweek* and paste them on file cards. Choose authors, executives, criminals, government officials, and foreign dignitaries, but avoid pictures that students would easily identify, such as Geraldine Ferraro or Alan Alda. I also avoid pictures from ads because professional models tend to look "fake." Ask each student to pick a card and to write a description of the person shown, basing the details solely on deductions made from the person's appearance. The assignment provokes a lively follow-up discussion since students discover how our attitudes toward people are influenced by their dress and physical appearance.

L. D. Groski, LaRoche College, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Shirley S. Stevens, Quaker Valley High School, Leetsdale, Pennsylvania

Volume 2, Number 2 November 1984

Writing Assignment of the Month

Poems That Recreate the Past

If our ancestors could speak to us, what would they say? What advice would they give us? What would they remember most? Would they be sorry about leaving this world, or glad to be finally in the next?

These questions and the poems in Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* became the basis for a class anthology based on the lives of students' ancestors. Interviewing relatives, writing, and delving into family histories was not a morbid assignment, but a lively one. Most of the students had previously completed either a coat of arms or a family tree, but few had actually investigated the life of a family member.

In the first stage of the assignment, students read selections from Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* and participate in class discussions. In choosing the poems that you want students to read, select several that have young people as subjects.

Students then choose ancestors and research their lives with special emphasis on the eccentricities and characteristics that made them unique. Student research may involve interviews with family members, looking through family albums, etc. Encourage students to find and bring in photographs of the relatives about whom they are writing.

After completing a fifteen-minute freewriting in class on their ancestors, students read what they have written and list important facts or phrases from the writing that they particularly like. These are then developed into poems. I asked students to work on the poems at home, but they had the opportunity to share their drafts and get feedback in reading/writing groups.

My students became involved with the assignment, and their enthusiasm involved others. One student confessed feeling uneasy writing about his "Pop-Pop" and would not show the poem to his mother because he felt almost "sacrilegious" writing about his grandfather. Perhaps his honesty made him uneasy; nonetheless, his poem is among the best of the collection. Another student chose not to have her poem included in the class anthology. Her poem—a beautifully honest poem about sibling rivalry—showed how she, the younger sister, felt she could not match the accomplishments of her older sister.

The students' poems were sensitive and poignant, and they captured the spirit of the times in which their ancestors lived. The following example especially demonstrates this:

Signora Gabriella

With my husband, I sailed
To a new life in a new country.
A different life in a strange place.
We did not speak the language.
The people viewed us as intruders
And the city was loud and frightening.
But with time came familiarity
And I made the city my home
And it, in its turn, gave me acceptance.
I raised my children and grew old
And watched the silver threads
Replace the black ones in my hair.
Sunny Naples became a bright memory
To think of in the cold winters
When there was no coal for the stove.

In the second stage of the assignment, students try to write about themselves, imagining that they died at their present ages. What would they say from the grave? What have they done to make their families or themselves proud? What were their goals?

The process is the same: freewriting, listing images and phrases, writing the poem, sharing with reading/writing groups, revising, and completing the poem. This part of the assignment was more difficult for my students than writing about their ancestors—most likely because the self-evaluation made them uncomfortable. One notable difference between the two poems was the quality of sadness evident in the poems that students wrote about themselves. Many regretted letting their youths pass without taking time to enjoy life.

When all the poems are completed and typed, set about assembling your own anthology, complete with pictures if possible. Students design a cover, reproduce the contents and cover, and bind the booklets. (We used a GBC binding machine, but you could use a three-hole punch and keep the manuscripts in three-ring binders.)

At the end of the assignment, students have studied American literature, completed original research, participated in the writing process, and published a booklet. Even more important than this, though, is how the students learn to see literature, their ancestry, and themselves from a different point of view by standing in the present and looking back.

Kristen P. Leedom, Alexandria, Virginia

Writing Assignments of the Month

Writing may be a cinch for a few, but for many, finding just the right words is a constant struggle. Although teachers probably shouldn't expect to take all the hardship out of writing, we can provide guidelines and activities such as the following to make sure that our student writers are on the right track.

Short and Sweet

The list of writing guidelines below looks short and sweet, but these are actually suggestions that a writer could spend a lifetime learning to follow. Use a handout of these guidelines to prompt discussion of the qualities of effective writing and to stimulate students to think about their own writing.

1. Concise is nice.
2. Specific is terrific.
3. Effective writing creates intellectual *and* emotional responses in a reader; strive for both in your writing.
4. Correct mechanics, grammar, and spelling are essential for the effective sharing of your ideas. However, there's plenty of time to take care of these elements after you've figured out exactly what you want to say. In other words, save it for the final draft.
5. Write often. If you don't feel inspired, practice moving your pencil across the paper!
6. Bring people into your writing as much as possible, in illustrations and examples.
7. Your writing must be interesting to a reader, and *you* are the only one who can make it so. If *you* do not want to read what you have written, neither will the reader.
8. Like dating, writing is more fun if at least two people are involved. Seek responses to your writing throughout its development.
9. Take chances. *Challenge* yourself in your writing by exploring and developing original viewpoints. Boring writing comes from a boring point of view, not from a boring subject.
10. Your writing should take into account how your readers think and feel. Ask yourself: "Who is my audience?" "What are the readers' interests and concerns?" Answering these questions will help you to know what you want to say.

James Upton, Burlington Community High School, Burlington, Iowa

Bubblegum Flowers

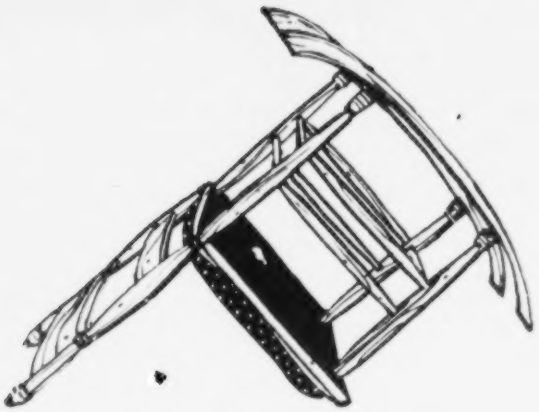
The first year that I taught tenth-grade composition, my students rebelled halfway through the semester. How, they demanded, could I expect them to write vivid descriptions of *ordinary* objects? I turned to art for help in showing students the importance of the artist's—or writer's—perspective: no matter what the object is, the manner in which it is perceived and portrayed can render it exciting. In developing a new unit, I selected Georgia O'Keefe as the focus because I knew the class would enjoy her paintings, would appreciate her memoirs, and would find Joan Didion's essay on O'Keefe in *The White Album* (Washington Square Press, 1979) an accessible model for future writing.

I began by asking my pupils to bring in a fresh flower or two the next day. I also brought in a bunch of daffodils and cut out a number of photographs of flowers from magazines. I looked for the tritest pictures possible—a rose with dewdrops, a huge sunflower, a bright red tulip.

The next day I asked each student to choose one flower, either a real one or a photograph, and to write a paragraph about it, describing it as carefully as possible. After fifteen minutes, I told everyone to stop and called on several students to read their paragraphs aloud. Although the descriptions tended to be stilted and full of clichés, I made no comments. Instead, I walked to a slide projector in the back of the room and showed students several slides of O'Keefe's flower paintings. I told the class a little about O'Keefe and then selected one slide for them to describe. (Once I used reproductions instead of slides; this took longer, but it worked well, too.) Again, I allotted fifteen minutes before choosing several students to read their descriptions. The second batch of paragraphs was far more exciting than the first; many students had used unusual similes and metaphors, and one student even compared the flower to the bubblegum underneath her chair!

For the remainder of the period, we compared the two sets of descriptions. Almost everyone agreed that the second batch was superior to the first, and we talked about why examining O'Keefe's paintings had resulted in better descriptions. Students mentioned selection and emphasis, and we discussed how they might have created interesting descriptions the first time by taking risks and using their imaginations.

On the following day, I read to the students the first few pages of O'Keefe's memoirs (entitled *Georgia O'Keefe*, Penguin Books, 1977). The narrative, which is full of light, color, texture, and sound, delighted the students and prompted a discussion of what made it successful. Ultimately, the class decided that the qualities that made her a good painter—her sharp eye and fine sense of humor—also made her an effective writer. As a homework assignment, I asked students to write a one-page description of one of the first events each student could remember from childhood, using what they had learned about prose from O'Keefe. I also asked them to read Didion's essay on O'Keefe in *The White Album*.



The next class session opened with a discussion of several students' memories. After savoring these for a few minutes and laughing at particularly outrageous exploits, we moved to Didion's essay, focusing on her use of characterization and details. We also studied the structure of the essay: Was there a thesis about O'Keefe's personality? What was it? How did Didion prove her point? (One student muttered that Didion did not have to follow a five-paragraph structure, and I brought up some examples of professional artists and writers who have taken risks or liberties with forms *after* they have mastered them.) The rest of the class period was spent in discussion of how students' views of writing had changed during the previous week.

This unit was a valuable diversion for students. The discussion of their own descriptions and of the essay form helped their writing, and they learned something about art as well. But best of all, students learned that the quality of a piece of writing is determined by the writer and not by the subject matter.

Amy Levin, Scarsdale High School, Scarsdale, New York

Volume 2 Number 4 April 1985

Writing Assignments of the Month

Based on Maurice Sagoff's *Shrinklits* (Workman, 1980), these playful assignments require that students use their own words and a bit of imagination to paraphrase a poem, story, chapter, or novel in one or more short rhymed verses.

Shrinklits . . .

As a prelude to précis writing or as an independent exercise, ask your students to capture a literary masterpiece concisely in a "shrinklit."

First, obtain a copy of Sagoff's book, if possible, and read aloud to your class a few shrinklits on works they have read. Then select a work already read and discussed in class, and ask students to write a shrinklit as a group. As they generate ideas, you can record their original and revised lines on the board.

Next, ask students to write shrinklits individually. They should choose works they have read, preferably ones they have read in class so that the other students will be better able to appreciate the results. Collect the shrinklits at the end of the class period and have copies made so that you can distribute them the next day.

This exercise can be used liberally throughout the year. Here are some sample shrinklits created by my students:

Shelley's "Ozymandias"

Foreign man
From magic land
Said: On the sand
Two stubs stand,
Detached head, sculptor-bred.
Inscription read:
"I am Ramses;
You're pansies."
Gone is he,
Care not we!

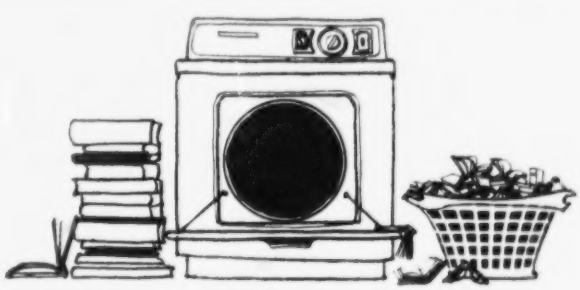
Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts"

Human indifference
Is the principal theme:
Icarus's plunge,
His pitiful scream
Caused no one to look
And come in a hurry.
It wasn't their fault;
My goodness, why worry?

Housman's "Loveliest of Trees"

With only fifty springs to go
A man of twenty finds much woe.
Two score and ten is lovely room
To appreciate cherry trees in bloom.
I myself would rather see
A cherry pie (or two or three!).

Duane Pitts, Odessa High School, Odessa, Washington



. . . and More Shrinklits

In writing book reviews, students often try to prove that they read the book by retelling the entire story line. Writing "shrinklits" is good practice in paring the plot down to the essentials.

After reading a couple of Sagoff's examples aloud, I suggest that students establish their own format. One

possibility is to alternate four- and five-syllable lines, use an ABCB rhyme scheme, and tell the story in twenty-five to thirty-five lines. An excerpt from my own shrinklit based on *The Pearl* follows.

Kino, Juana
  And Coyotito,
A family
  Poor from Mexico.
They found one day
  The rarest jewel,
Little knowing
  Fate would be cruel.

Before asking students to write shrinklits on a given work, I initiate a discussion of the plot to ensure that students remember and include the most important points in their shrinklits.

Joseph Foley, Lacombe Junior High School, Lacombe, Alberta

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